

FORUM

COMMENTARY

Donald Trump, the Jacksonian press ... and today

Richard M. Perloff

To paraphrase Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the political sun.

It might seem that President-elect Donald Trump's use of Fox News as a veritable staffing agency for his Cabinet and federal posts — 11 of his nominees are Fox News hosts or contributors — is unusual in the legions of White House appointments, even historic. It isn't. Andrew Jackson — like Trump, a brash populist with a head of fulsome red hair — appointed many editors of politically congenial news outlets to be part of his kitchen cabinet, with more than 50 editors of pro-Jackson newspapers getting patronage positions around the country during this time.

Long before Trump nominated former Fox News host Pete Hegseth to head the Defense Department, Jackson — the nation's seventh president — tapped Amos Kendall, editor of the *Argus of Western America*, and Francis Preston Blair, editor of the *Washington Globe*, to be close advisers.

You see, newspapers in Jackson's time were partisan platforms. The federal government doled out lucrative printing contracts to favored partisan editors. Political parties funded newspapers, and editors were often leaders of political parties, dedicated to presenting a strident, one-sided view of their party's pros and their adversaries' shortcomings, for the party was where the bread was buttered, the deals cut, and the opinionated arguments carved out.

So history offers solace to those concerned that the president-elect is drawing too heavily on his favorite media platform to make all-important federal appointments. We've been there before and survived. But contrary to Alexis de Tocqueville's overly positive views, the newspapers of this era were laden with partisan falsehoods that divided the new country into different fact-based communities.

Yet we seem to be oblivious to Santayana's warning that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," for we are sliding back into a cycle of partisan political communication, with a symbiotic relationship between government and favored press outlets, and politically skewed reporting on partisan platforms.

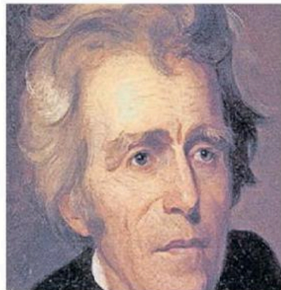
The Republicans and Democrats do not fund cable networks in the manner that parties financed newspapers in the 1830s, but they recruit audiences by promoting content that aligns with viewers' biases, while derogating views offered by their adversaries. This promotes polarization and distrust.

Important insights on this problem have emerged from the results of recently published research. Across 25 nations, people who placed their trust in social media (with its frequently partisan hyperbolic messaging about electoral fraud) harbored misperceptions of electoral integrity. Although MSNBC harbors its share of liberal biases, another study found that it is only Fox News (which encourages guests to advocate conspiracy views) that fosters a conspiracy mentality among its viewers.

Belief that our elections are riddled with electoral fraud, a view that is demonstrably false, can lead extremists to engage in anti-democratic actions that precipitate violence. A conspiracy mindset in the health area can cause social media partisans to falsely believe vaccines are a plot by elites to perpetrate medical harm and thus to resist getting vaccinated.



Blair House — the official state guest house for the president of the United States — lies opposite the West Wing of the White House, and adjacent to Lafayette Park. It was acquired in 1836 by Francis Preston Blair, a newspaper publisher and influential adviser to President Andrew Jackson, who surrounded himself with politically aligned media moguls — similar, in some ways, to the Cabinet choices of president-elect Donald Trump, writes Richard M. Perloff, a Cleveland State University professor. AP



President Andrew Jackson, the nation's seventh president. *National Gallery of Art*

It turns out that, for this and other reasons, more Americans are declining to get vaccinated against viruses, reducing the overall effectiveness of vaccines.

But there is good news, too, com-

ing from an unexpected, old-fashioned source. Use of legacy news media is associated with less belief in electoral falsehoods and greater trust in democratic elections. Trust of mainstream media, which calls on scientific facts about vaccines, can promote accurate vaccine knowledge and reduce vaccine hesitancy.

As a new administration takes over, with new issues coming to the fore — like the prominence of Silicon Valley billionaires in top government positions that gives them risibly obvious opportunities to feather their own nests — we need legacy news more than ever to do what it does best: Hold the silk-stocking-encased feet of the powerful to the fires of truth and accountability.

This underscores the need for professional journalism, which tells us what we need to know, not what our personal biases tell us we want to hear.

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